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ABSTRACT

Recent studies on parental disciplinary practices focus on children's attributes that influence harshness of discipline. The present study examined the effects of facial babyishness on parents' recommendations regarding the discipline of 4- and 11-year-old children who had perpetrated an act of commission or of omission. It was predicted that the actions of babyfaced children would be perceived as less intentional, and that babyfaced children would be punished less harshly than their maturefaced counterparts. A total of 32 mothers and 32 fathers of 10- to 12-year-old children participated. Each parent read eight vignettes describing either 4- or 11-year-old children's misdeeds. Attached to each vignette was a black-and-white photograph of a child, who had been rated as either babyfaced or maturefaced by introductory psychology students. As predicted, the misdeeds of babyfaced children were perceived as less intentional than those of maturefaced children. The severity of punishment recommended revealed "an age X facial babyishness interaction." Less severe punishment was recommended for babyfaced than maturefaced 4-year-olds. However, babyfaced 11-year-olds were punished more harshly than maturefaced ones. It is concluded that the findings have implications for parents and parent education. (Author/RH)

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# Parental Reactions to Transgressions by Babyfaced and Maturefaced 4 and 11 Year Old Children

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Poster presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Kansas City, MO, April, 1989. For further information, write to Leslie Zebrowitz-McArthur or Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, Department of Psychology, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02254-9110.

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Running Head: TRANSGRESSIONS

## Abstract

Recent studies on parental disciplinary practices focus on children's attributes that influence harshness of discipline. The present study examined the effects of facial babyishness on parents' recommendations regarding the discipline of 4 and 11 year old children who had committed either an act of commission or an act of omission. It was predicted that the actions of babyfaced children would be perceived as less intentional, and tnat babyfaced children would be punished less harshly than their maturefaced counterparts. Thirty-two mothers and 32 fathers of 10-12 year old children participated. Each parent read eight vignettes describing either 4 or 11 year old children's misdeeds. Attached to each vignette was a black-and-white photograph of a child, who had been rated as either babyfaced or maturefaced by introductory psychology students. As predicted, the misdeeds of babyfaced children were perceived as less intentional than those of maturefaced children. The severity of punishment recommended revealed an age X facial babyishness interaction. Lesser punishment was recommended for the babyfaced than maturefaced 4 year olds. However, babyfaced 11 year olds were punished more harshly than maturefaced ones.

# Parental Reactions to Transgressions by Babyfaced and Maturefaced 4 and 11 Year Old Children

Does a child's appearance influence a parent's discipline decision? Researchers have been increasingly interested in this question. Past studies indicate that characteristics such as physical attractiveness (Berkowitz & Frodi, 1979; Dion, 1972), and perceived age and developmental level (Dix, Ruble, Grusec, & Nixon, 1986) do influence parents' reactions to children. Another fruitful area of research has been on the cranio-facial dimensions of children--their "babyfacedness"-- and its effect on the parents' reaction to them. McCabe (1984) found that physically abused children in child protective service casefiles were much more likely to be maturefaced than their nonabused counterparts. Maturefacedness was judged by measurement of cranio-facial proportions from children's pictures in the casefiles. McCabe argued that the maturefacedness of the abused children may have led parents to have higher and unrealistic expectations regarding their behavior. Not surprisingly, unrealistic expectations by parents is a significant contributor to child abuse (Spinnetta & Rigler, 1972). Moreover, a recent study by McArthur and Fafel (1988) found that parents assigned more cognitively demanding tasks to maturefaced 11 year olds than to their babyfaced peers, thus reflecting higher expectations regarding the capabilities of the maturefaced children.

The question remains as to whether the higher expectations of maturefaced children are relevant to every-day misbehavior and whether these higher expectations are associated with more punitive treatment of maturefaced children. The present study

examined parents' reactions to the misdeeds of babyfaced and maturefaced boys and girls in two different age groups (4 and 11 year olds). It was predicted that parents would be more upset by the misdeeds of maturefaced children, perceive the misdeeds of maturefaced children as more intentional, and recommend more severe punishment for maturefaced than babyfaced children of the same age. It was also predicted that parents would be more upset by the misdeeds of 11 year olds than 4 year olds, perceive the misdeeds of 11 year olds as more intentional, and recommend more severe punishment for 11 year olds.

## Method

### Subjects

Sixty-four white middle-class parents of 10-12 year olds (32 mothers, 32 fathers) were recruited from community groups in the Boston Metropolitan area. Most of the subjects were married (89%), but 9% were divorced, and 2% were widowed. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of sixteen conditions.

### Stimulus Materials

Photographs. A total of 16 black and white photographs of children were used, out of a pool of 96 pictures. Each parent saw a total of eight pictures, either of 4-year old children (4 females, 4 males) or 11-year old children (4 females, 4 males). Within each age group, there were pictures of two babyfaced and two maturefaced children of each sex.

Undergraduates, recruited from introductory psychology classes, rated the "babyfacedness," and attractiveness of the photographs to be used in this study, using a seven-point bipolar

scale.

The reliability of the student ratings was calculated by Cronbach's alpha. The standardized alphas for babyfacedness and attractiveness ranged from .75 to .87. Pictures having the highest babyfaced or maturefaced ratings were selected. Pictures were matched for perceived attractiveness, hair lightness and style, and facial expression (e.g., smile or no smile, mouth open or mouth closed). All the photographs were of white children.

Vignettes. Parents read eight brief vignettes that described children's misdeeds. The same vignettes were used in all conditions. Each vignette used a "gender-neutral" child's name (e.g., Chris, Randi, Gerri). The vignettes, pictures, and names were counter-balanced so that each picture was matched with each vignette, and each name, which created 16 conditions (eight for 4 year old children, eight for 11 year old children).

Four vignettes described acts of commission (hurting another child or destroying property), and four described acts of omission (not helping or not sharing). The vignettes were deliberately worded in an ambiguous fashion so that it was difficult to tell whether the act described was intentional or accidental.

Questionnaires. Each of the eight vignettes was followed by a one-page questionnaire with four questions. Question 1 asked how the parent would feel if she or he witnessed the act described, with the poles on a seven-point scale being "not at all upset" to "very upset." Question 2 asked them to indicate on a seven-point scale how likely or unlikely it was that the action was intentional.

In questions 3 and 4, parents were asked to give a global rating of the punitiveness they recommended on a seven-point scale with "the most severe punishment I would use" and "no punishment at all" as the poles. In the second part of questions 3 and 4, parents were asked to select specific responses they would make from a list of eight alternatives that included ignoring the behavior, asking about the behavior, telling about proper behavior, having the child make restitution, having the child sit alone for a time, taking away a privilege, verbally criticizing, or physically punishing. Parents could check as many items as they wanted. Questions 3 and 4 were identical except one asked them to assume the actions were intentional, whereas the other asked them to assume they were accidental.

Following the vignettes, the parents were asked to rate the punitiveness (harshness) of each of the eight responses to a misdeed, using a seven-point scale.

Finally, parents rated on 7-point scales the perceived attractiveness and babyfacedness of each child they had seen. This final sequence was a check of the manipulation. The pictures were presented in one of two random orders in a separate mini-album, where each page had only the child's picture and an identification number which corresponded to the number next to a seven-point scale on the data collection sheet.

Procedure

Subjects were given notebooks with the stimulus materials and questionnaires. The first page was an instruction sheet describing the task and the cover story. Subjects were told that the vignettes were notes from a junior camp counselor's notebook describing children's misdeeds.

The vignettes followed the instruction sheet. In a notebook, a vignette with a picture attached was on the left-hand page; the questionnaire for the vignette was on the right.

Upon completion of the vignette section, each parent was asked to complete the general information questions, general punishment questions, and ratings of the children's faces.

After completion of data collection, parents were debriefed as to the purposes of the study, and thanked for their participation.

## Results

Data Analysis

Data for Perceived Intentionality, Perceived Babyfacedness and Attractiveness, and How Upset Would You Be were analyzed by a 2 X 2 X 8 X 2 X 2 X 2 (Target Age X Parent Gender X Questionnaire Form X Face X Type of Transgression X Target Gender) ANOVA. Data for Overall Level of Punishment, and the individual punishments recommended were analyzed by a six-factor ANOVA which took into account the variable Plea (reaction based on whether the action was accidental or intentional). The ANOVAs for these analyses were 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 (Target Age X Parent Gender X Face X Type of Transgression X Target Gender X Plea).

## Manipulation Checks

### Perceived Babyfacedness.

As predicted, there was a main effect for facial maturity, with babyfaced target children ($M$ = 4.94) appearing significantly more babyfaced than maturefaced target children ($M$ = 2.84), $F(1,32)$ = 178.34, $p<.0001$. Although there was an Age X Face X Target Sex interaction ($F(1,32)$ = 6.89, $p < .01$), the predicted effect of babyfacedness held true for all comparisons, within each target age and gender, all $p$s < .001. The effect was largest for 4 year old females, and smallest for 4 year old males thus accounting for the triple-order interaction.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### Perceived Attractiveness.

As predicted, the perceived attractiveness of babyfaced children ($M$ = 5.01) did not differ significantly from that of maturefaced children, ($M$ = 5.16), $F(1,32)$ = 3.17, $p < .08$. There was a significant Age X Face X Target Sex interaction ($F(1,32)$=7.74, $p < .009$). The only significant difference was for 4 year old girls; maturefaced girls ($M$ = 5.50) were judged to be significantly more attractive than babyfaced girls ($M$ = 4.97), $t(31)$ = 6.35, $p < .01$. The babyfaced and maturefaced children in all other groups did not differ in attractiveness, all $p$s > .30. Since in no groups were babyfaced children perceived as more attractive than maturefaced children, less punitive treatment of babyfaced children cannot be attributed to an attractiveness halo

effect.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Perceived Intentionality

Although the trend was in the predicted direction, the transgressions of 4 year olds were not perceived as significantly less intentional ($M$ = 3.16) than those of 11 year olds ($M$ = 3.49), $F(1,32) = 2.23$, $p < .15$. As predicted, there was a main effect for facial maturity with the transgressions of babyfaced children being perceived as less intentional ($M$=3.16) than those of maturefaced children ($M$ = 3.49), $F(1,32) = 10.42$, $p < .003$. There was also an Age X Subject Gender X Face interaction, $F(1,32) = 4.25$, $p < .05$, reflecting the largest effect of facial maturity when mothers judged 4 year olds and the smallest effect when fathers judged 4 year olds. The effect of facial maturity was significant for mothers' ratings of 4 year olds ($M$ = 2.78 and 3.47) and 11 year olds ($M$ = 3.45 and 3.81), $t$s(15) = 4.86 and 2.54, $p$s < .01. It was also significant for fathers' judgments of 11 year olds ($M$ = 3.16 and 3.53), $t(15) = 2.61$, $p < .01$, but not for their judgments of 4 year olds ($M$ = 3.27 and 3.14), whose actions were perceived as relatively low in intentionality regardless of their facial appearance, $t(31) = .92$.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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In addition, there was a Subject Gender X Target Sex X Face interaction, $F(1,32) = 7.30$, $p < .01$, reflecting a cross-gender effect. Fathers perceived the transgressions of babyfaced girls as less intentional ($M = 2.80$) than those of maturefaced girls ($M = 3.20$), $t(31) = 2.20$, $p < .05$, and mothers perceived the transgressions of babyfaced boys ($M = 2.88$) as less intentional than those of maturefaced boys ($M = 3.88$), $t(31) = 5.50$, $p < .01$. On the other hand, fathers' intentionality judgments did not differentiate between baby ($M = 3.56$) and maturefaced boys ($M = 3.47$), $t(31) = .495$, and mothers' judgments did not differentiate between baby and maturefaced girls, ($M = 3.36$; 3.41), $t(31) = .275$.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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How Upset Would You Be?

Contrary to prediction, there was not a significant main effect for Age, $F < 1$, ($M = 3.49$ and 3.58 for 4 and 11 year olds respectively), nor was there a significant main effect for Face, $F < 1$, on parents' reports of how upset they would be by the transgression ($M = 3.53$ and 3.54 for baby and maturefaced respectively). There was, however, a significant Age X Face X Type of Transgression interaction, $F(1,32) = 4.98$, $p < .03$. Parents were less upset by the commissions of babyfaced ($M = 3.55$) than maturefaced ($M = 3.81$) 4 year olds, $t(31) = 1.81$, $p < .10$, as predicted, but more upset by the commissions of babyfaced ($M = 3.88$) than maturefaced 11 year olds ($M = 3.53$),

$t(31) = 2.44$, $p < .05$.

For acts of omission, facial maturity had no effect on how upset parents said they would be with 4 year olds, $t < 1$, or 11 year olds, $t(31) = 1.53$, $p < .20$.

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Insert Table 5 about here

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Overall Level of Severity.

Contrary to prediction, there was no main effect for Age on the recommended severity of punishment, $F < 1$, ($M$s = 3.13 and 3.05 for 4 and 11 year olds respectively). Also contrary to prediction, there was no main effect for facial maturity on the recommended severity of punishment, $F < 1$, ($M$s = 3.07 and 3.11 for baby and maturefaced respectively).

An Age X Face X Type of Transgression interaction ($F(1,60) = 4.76$, $p < .03$) revealed that the three-way interaction was due to the severity of punishment recommended for acts of commission. For these acts, parents recommended less punishment for babyfaced ($M$ = 3.16) than maturefaced ($M$ = 3.44) 4 year olds, $t(31) = 3.17$, $p < .04$, while recommending more punishment for babyfaced ($M$ = 3.45) than maturefaced 11 year olds ($M$ = 3.11), $t(31) = 3.85$, $p < .01$. For acts of omission, less severe punishment was recommended for babyfaced than maturefaced children of both ages, as had been predicted, although none of these differences were significant, all $p$s > .1.

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Insert Table 6 about here

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## Discussion

As predicted, parents thought that the transgressions of babyfaced children were less intentional than those of maturefaced children. The results were especially strong when the target child was a 4 year old girl, and when parents were evaluating the behavior of an opposite-sex child. As predicted, parents saw maturefaced children as more intentional in their actions than babyfaced children of the same age, possibly because they perceive the maturefaced children to be at a higher developmental level than the babyfaced children (Dix et al., 1987). The perception of babyfaced children as acting less intentionally than maturefaced children is also consistent with results from studies on baby and maturefaced adults. For example, in Berry and Zebrowitz-McArthur's (1988) simulated trial study, babyfaced men were less likely than maturefaced men to be convicted of intentional crimes.

Another interesting finding related to the perceived intentionality of misdeeds, is found in the Subject Gender X Target Sex X Face interaction. There appears to be a cross-gender effect, with fathers "picking up" on babyfaced cues of girls and judging the transgressions of babyfaced girls as less intentional than those of maturefaced girls. Mothers in this study picked up on the babyfaced cues of boys, and judged the transgressions of babyfaced boys as less intentional than those of maturefaced boys. Fathers did not differentiate between baby

and maturefaced boys, and mothers did not differentiate between baby and maturefaced girls. Zebrowitz-McArthur and Tennenbaum (1987), also found a cross-gender effect. Their study revealed that when college students made judgments about baby and maturefaced male and female adult targets, the effect of facial maturity was strongest when the subject was making judgments about an opposite sex target.

For overall level of punishment, an interesting pattern emerged. Consistent with our hypotheses, less severe punishments are recommended for babyfaced than maturefaced 4 year olds, although not all of the cell means showed significant differences. Contrary to prediction, however, more severe punishments were sometimes recommended for babyfaced than maturefaced 11 year olds. One factor that appeared to influence severity of punishment for the 11 year old babyfaced children was Type of Transgression. It is when a babyfaced 11 year old commits an act of commission that more severe punishment is recommended than for his or her maturefaced counterpart.

There are several possible explanations for the tendency to recommend more severe punishment for babyfaced than maturefaced 11 year olds committing acts of commission. One is the unexpectedness of the action. Berry and Zebrowitz-McArthur (1988) proposed the idea that certain transgressions are more expected from baby vs. maturefaced individuals in a simulated trial study. Judges recommended more severe punishment for maturefaced than babyfaced men who admitted negligent offenses, presumably because the babyfaced defendants looked as though they couldn't help it.

On the other hand, when defendants admitted committing intentional offenses, it was the babyfaced ones who received stiffer sentences, perhaps because their actions seemed worse by virtue of disconfirming perceivers' benign expectations regarding babyfaced people. Like a negligent offense by babyfaced adults, acts of omission by babyfaced children may be expected. But parents might find it very surprising that the babyfaced child commits the more serious act of commission. This type of transgression may seem so out of character for the child, that the parent reacts more strongly because it disconfirms their expectations.

Interestingly and contrary to prediction, there were no significant main effects for age of the child in this study. The most likely explanation for this finding is that because age was a between-subjects factor, parents' use of the rating scales was not as sensitive to difference in their judgments about 4 and 11 year old children as they would be if they were making direct comparisons between these age groups.

The results from the present study indicate that facial maturity does influence parental responses to children's misdeeds. That these facial characteristics did influence parents' responses is especially striking because the parents in this study were, for the most part, highly educated and from middle to upper-middle socioeconomic backgrounds. Indeed, a sizable proportion of them indicated that they worked with children on a regular basis, either as teachers, physicians, or child psychiatrists. We generally would not expect that these highly functioning parents would be influenced by facial cues of

children.

The results of the present study have implications for parents and parent education. Parents, especially those having difficulties, could be taught to recognize that children's facial maturity might be influencing their reactions. Indeed, anyone who works with children could be made aware of characteristics that can influence them and their disciplinary decisions, and help them make rational decisions about how to handle children.

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Table 1

Means of Age X Face X Target Sex Interaction for Perceived Babyfacedness.

| 4 year olds | | |
|---|---|---|
| | baby | mature |
| male | 4.89 | 3.14 |
| female | 5.23 | 2.67 |
| **11 year olds** | | |
| | baby | mature |
| male | 5.02 | 2.80 |
| female | 4.64 | 2.75 |
| Grand Mean | 4.94 | 2.84 |

Table 2

Means of Age X Face X Target Sex Interaction for Perceived Attractiveness of Target Children.

| 4 year olds | baby | mature |
|---|---|---|
| male | 5.36 | 5.31 |
| female | 4.97 | 5.50 |
| **11 year olds** | | |
| | baby | mature |
| male | 4.77 | 4.86 |
| female | 4.94 | 4.95 |
| Grand Mean | 5.01 | 5.16 |

Table 3

Means of Age X Subject Gender X Face Interaction for Perceived Intentionality.

| 4 year olds | baby | mature |
|---|---|---|
| fathers | 3.27 | 3.14 |
| mothers | 2.78 | 3.47 |

| 11 year olds | baby | mature |
|---|---|---|
| fathers | 3.16 | 3.53 |
| mothers | 3.45 | 3.81 |

| Grand Mean | 3.16 | 3.49 |
|---|---|---|

Table 4

Means of Subject Gender X Target Sex X Face Interaction for Perceived Intentionality.

| Fathers | | |
|---|---|---|
| | baby | mature |
| male | 3.56 | 3.47 |
| female | 2.86 | 3.20 |
| **Mothers** | | |
| | baby | mature |
| male | 2.88 | 3.88 |
| female | 3.59 | 3.41 |
| Grand Mean | 3.22 | 3.49 |

Table 6

Means of Age X Face X Type of Transgression Interaction for How Upset Parents Would Be.

| 4 year olds | | |
|---|---|---|
| | baby | mature |
| omission | 3.34 | 3.27 |
| commission | 3.55 | 3.81 |

| 11 year olds | | |
|---|---|---|
| | baby | mature |
| omission | 3.34 | 3.56 |
| commission | 3.88 | 3.53 |
| Grand Mean | 3.53 | 3.54 |

Table 6

Means of Age X Face X Type of Transgression for Overall Level of Recommended Punishment.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4 year olds | | |
| | baby | mature |
| omission | 2.88 | 3.03 |
| commission | 3.16 | 3.44 |
| 11 year olds | | |
| | baby | mature |
| omission | 2.78 | 2.86 |
| commission | 3.45 | 3.11 |
| Grand Mean | 3.07 | 3.11 |